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ABSTRACT

During the 20th century, the involvement of communities in education has deteriorated, and the school and the community have evolved into separate worlds. This chapter describes ways in which a typical high school has increased its interactions with its own community. Those interactions have two dimensions: to bring the community into the school and to bring the school into the community. The first dimension uses community people as a resource. Community people have presented information and instruction in their area of expertise, provided transportation for field trips, and served as volunteer staff for major wilderness trips. An important result of this extensive contact is the development of a body of taxpayers who are accurately informed about and strongly supportive of the school and its programs. Examples of the second dimension include student "work days" that began as fund raising for an extracurricular outdoor program and developed into an essential community service, and an agreement with a local industrial lab in which senior biology students worked with research scientists for 2-5 days. The most serious implication of community involvement is the consequence of having people learn what is happening in school. If a school seeks allies in the community, it must be prepared to listen to criticism, join in reexamining its curriculum and practices, and act on community values and recommendations. Another difficulty is the lack of teacher education on community involvement, which has been overcome in this case by a stable community-based teaching staff. (SV)

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Chapter 5

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

Bill Patterson and Bert Horwood

Bill Patterson was educated with a BSA from the University of Guelph in 1961. He taught Sciences and headed the Science Department at Mackenzie High School, Deep River, Ontario, for most of his career. For 20 years he was one of the leaders of Trekkers, a highly successful outdoor program. In 1990, Bill began a multicredit, integrated program, called TAM-ARACK, in which students make full use of community facilities and people.

Bert Horwood, as editor, is introduced elsewhere. Bert had taught with Bill in Deep River and they collaborated subsequently in several research projects.

This chapter explores the interface between the school and the community. The relationship works both ways. The community entering the school and the school moving into the community enrich both the kind and number of experiences for students. There are tensions in that interface but, as the authors show, communities can supply great support for experiential education. Teachers will need to give up some control, but there is no need for them to give up influence.

Introduction

Up until the late 19th century, except for a few private schools, educating children was a family and community function. Children learned from their parents, their extended families, and frequently from neighbours. The community exerted an enormous influence on children, both in terms of what they learned and what values they developed. Children were not only responsible to their parents, but also to the community which insisted on appropriate behaviour. Unacceptable behaviour led to community feedback which often resulted in conduct being modified. Children had regular, close contact with adults and were called on to do important work in the home or community; they made a contribution to their society. Community involvement in education is not new. In fact, it has been the rule as long as there have been human communities.

As schools staffed with specialized, professional teachers evolved, there was an increasing separation of education from the community. Professional teachers became society's official educators and schools were built as the official place of education. With increasing separation, the importance of the parents and the community became less, and education as a business began. As we moved through the 20th century, and larger numbers of students stayed in school for longer periods of time, the isolation from the community became greater. While school buildings may be frequently used by community groups, few people in the community, including parents, really know what is going on when school is in session. They feel they have little real influence. They are right. Public dissatisfaction with the educational system and the hankering back to imagined good old days is almost certainly a result of this ignorance. At the same time, teachers and the education business march on to a curriculum drummer that has little to do with the local community or the real world.

The official curriculum of schools is mostly designed by people who have spent their lives within the world of schools. This makes the curriculum reflect its own values and contain little of community influence. The energies of students are driven into this isolated curriculum, and as a consequence, they are removed from making

the contributions to family and community life which had been usual through most of human history. The growing isolation of school and community was fed by compulsory education laws and even more powerfully by the social stigma attached to young persons who dropped out to make their own ways in the world. To the extent that this separation of community and education is complete, both students and communities lose out on important aspects of learning. Perhaps this is what Oscar Wilde meant when he remarked that, while schooling may be admirable, nothing worth knowing can really be taught.

Society, in the age of the technical expert, has generally left education up to the professionals. The result, in spite of routine criticism, has been the evolution of a public conviction that *real, important* education is something that occurs only in official learning places, like schools, colleges, and universities, under the tutelage of professional educators (National Commission, 1983). The general acceptance of this perception is expressed in help-wanted advertisements. Job applicants must be high school or college graduates or hold university degrees as evidence of schooling. Relevant experience may be valued but the seal of approval from the official education place is centrally important.

Through the last quarter (approximately) of the 20th century, there has been a significant interest in involving the community more actively with the school, and vice versa. Cooperative education (known as internships in some jurisdictions), where students work at jobs in the community as part of their schooling, is a good example. The formation of committees of parents to look at specific aspects of school life and work is another trend which reverses isolation. While these are important actions, there are many other potential ways in which a positive, informed interaction between education and the community can be reestablished. Such interactions will make the schools more completely an integral part of the communities they ought to serve. They will also bring community people into active participation with children rather then being nothing other than remote sources of funding through taxation.

It is not our intention to advocate a return to communities without schools and professional teachers. Rather, the purpose of this chapter is to describe ways in which a typical high school has

increased its interactions with its own community. Those interactions have two dimensions. One is to bring community members into the school and into partnership within school programs. The other is to bring the school into the community and into partnership with community events and activities. This chapter itself is an example of a third kind of interaction in which a high school teacher and a university professor collaborate. There are mutual benefits for all parties and the processes described can be adapted to fit many different situations.

The school which provides all of our examples (with one exception) had about 550 students at the time of writing, down from a peak 1,110 students ten years earlier. It is the only secondary school serving its town and surrounding area. Part of a scattered County system of schools with headquarters some 40 km away, the school offers a largely traditional mix of academic and vocational courses, plus a normal range of extracurricular activities. The description which follows is based on the actions of a single teacher or small groups of teachers as they do their work. As such, it represents a grass-roots development of increased community involvement rather than an implementation of school or County policy.

Bringing the Community into the School

The People in the Community as a Resource

The citizens in the community represent a deep well of resources that is rarely tapped, especially by secondary schools. These people possess a host of skills, great knowledge, wisdom, and broad experience. They are at a variety of stages in their lives and offer perspectives related to their ages, a vivid contrast with the narrower spectrum of ages and stages with which most secondary students spend their days.

Based on interactions in our community, most of these people are willing to share their experiences with students. Indeed, they are eager to do so. Unfortunately, schools tend to give the impression that such help is not wanted. And this may well be the case, as a community visitor or community placement might not deal with

matter related to the curriculum. To the extent that the curriculum, and its expression in textbooks, is the driving force in schools, this should not come as a surprise.

Community people can, at the most basic level, be sources of information for the school. A physician discusses sexually transmitted diseases, an artist leads a watercolour workshop, a garage owner tells stories about auto repairs as a career, or a geneticist visits a senior biology class. These people from outside the school are seen by students as a part of the real world and are perceived by them, as a result, to be reliable. Visits to community facilities like industries, shops, hospitals, and courts are equally useful and unique experiences which provide students more information about their world than can possibly be revealed in school. The generator hall in a hydroelectric dam is a very different thing in reality than is its textbook or film portrayal. You have to be there.

Every community includes people who have exceptional skills in traditional crafts and who are willing to instruct others. Such people teach students elementary skills in a traditional craft in a traditional way. At the same time, students develop an appreciation of the traditions involved (Steele, 1989). An illustration of this type of community involvement occurred in our high school when one of the teachers learned that a member of the community made Native-style, canoe pack baskets from black ash logs, using traditional hand tools. The craftsman cut fresh logs and brought them to the school. For the next two days, students stripped bark, pounded the logs with sledge hammers, peeled off thin strips of the ash wood, and wove the strips into large baskets. All of this required hard work, care, and cooperation. Throughout those days, the students talked with the craftsman and used his tools. At the end, each student had made a basket, gained pride in his or her work, learned to appreciate the craft of black-ash weaving, and acquired, through direct experience, a better understanding of life in the days of hand tools. Students also experienced the quality of "complete process" (Horwood, 1994) as they worked the original materials to the finished product. Equally important, they had made friends with the craftsman and experienced his love for working with wood.

Retiring at earlier ages and with enormous specialized skills, retirees offer opportunities for productive collaboration with

schools. Our experience in another high school, where a Foreign Service retiree gave lessons in a language not otherwise available, suggested that a similar opportunity could be developed in our school. Here, retirees with computer skills are organized to help students with some of the excellent computer simulations available on environmental and global issues. Such involvement takes advantage of available technology which a busy teacher is not able to put into place. The retirees become direct instructors and leaders, the teacher facilitates and organizes, and the students execute the computer simulations. This type of cooperation between schools and communities has almost unlimited potential.

Community Assistance with Transportation

As the economic squeeze is put on education, schools have less money to spend on transportation. There are two possible responses to this situation. The easy one is to simply cut back travel. Unfortunately, this solution further reduces the contact between students and the community and makes the isolation worse. The second, more creative and difficult response is to actively seek alternative travel arrangements helped by people in the community.

One way to achieve this is for individual teachers to involve community members as active participants in all aspects of projects, including those requiring extra travel. Community helpers may participate to varying degrees in the projects, but one certain result is that travel can occur, often at little or no cost to the school. In one experiential program in our school, students travel approximately 1,000 km to access three different wilderness trips during the semester. The parents meet as a group with the teacher once a month as part of their involvement with the program. At this meeting, the activities of the past month are reviewed and plans for the next month are discussed. Planning includes parental participation in transportation for the next outings. Other residents from the community also help to staff the program and they may provide transportation as well. The end result is that parents and other community people not only support the program with their presence but also provide caring transportation at virtually no cost. This service is essential for the operation of the program.

This example may not be feasible in places where education is governed by law suits, and may not be needed where school districts have a generous supply of busses, vans, and trailers. The point is to illustrate the kind of community response that is possible to a chronic need in an experiential program.

Community Attitudes Toward Schools

A continual theme in the popular media since the 1980s is carping criticism of the educational system and its standards. Fingers are always ready to point to the schools, districts, and nations whose scores are below average. The criticism is almost always associated with calls to return to rigorous standards of examination and heavy emphasis on reading, writing, and arithmetic.

In our experience, much of this criticism is based on ignorance of what actually goes on in schools. Judgments about what adolescents are like are made at a distance, either from remote standardized test scores, or from images of teenagers in malls, on T.V. screens, and from newspapers. When adults do not live with school-age children, they have very little direct contact with the young.

In our school, where as many as 10%-15% of the school population is made up of adults, or where adults are involved in helping with programs, a different attitude exists. These adults combine their normal roles in the community with roles as stakeholders in the school. They have much better information about the school, and have it from direct observation and experience. It is commonplace in our school to hear adults make statements like, "I wish I had had an opportunity like that when I was in school." This kind of statement reflects a much more positive attitude than one which wants the school to return to an imaginary, no-nonsense past.

The result is that there develops in the community a body of taxpayers who are accurately informed and strongly supportive. These people become politically active, lobbying the County School Board and urging support for good programs even if it may mean increased taxes. People are willing to pay for value for the children of the community, but first they must be convinced that value is there. It is impossible to overestimate the influence exerted by

informed community people acting as an advocacy group. The fact is that active involvement of the community jn a school will convert the majority of taxpayers from critics (a problem) to allies (a solution). However, for this to happen, teachers and school administrations must act on the potential and not hide behind school walls. It is also necessary that community involvement go far beyond the tokenism that has plagued the Parent Teacher Association movement. In this account, community members who participate in our school programs have a real voice and a real job to do.

Community Staff for Trips

School programs with large experiential components are usually stretched when it comes to supervision in the field. School policy, common sense, safety, and simple management factors clearly indicate that one teacher with 20 students on a wilderness outing, for example, is an impossible situation. Somehow, more supervising staff members must be found.

Most communities include men and women skilled in and enthusiastic for outdoor travel. They are invariably willing and able to help when invited. Parents of students currently in the school are especially keen, but help is easily found among those whose families have outgrown school as well as those who have never had any connection with the school. In our community, the teacher was able to develop a list of such people from parent interviews, discussions with youth leaders such as Scouts and Guides, contact with outdoor groups, and local news stories.

Once possible helpers are identified, it is important to invite them to a meeting to discuss the proposed trips, the trip goals and philosophy, mutual interests, needs, and expectations. Not everyone will be able to take part. But from the willing and able, it is possible to build a powerful support team.

Our community team has helped staff major wilderness trips for several years. On one remote canoe trip (8 days, 150 km) with 16 students, the following support team was in place:

the teacher and program leader,

a student-teacher intern,

a retired mechanical engineer with extensive arctic canoe experience,

a retired technologist and Scout leader,

a retired Math and Science teacher from the leader's school,

a former English teacher,

a forestry technician and naturalist,

a forester with special expertise in fire-fighting technology,

an engineer, parent of one of the students, and

a professor of experiential education.

The ages of these people ranged from 69 to 25; three were women.

Clearly, the group of adults is impressive and large. It might be argued that the trip was overly supervised. We would agree except that it was the students who requested that particular people be included in addition to the original staff of six. As well as providing the supervision needed for safety and high quality, the adults from the community brought a dimension that the teenagers lack in school: friendly, non-authoritarian contact with adults who are perceived as being part of the real world beyond the world of school.

The long-term advantage of having a staff group like the one described is that the school has nine more strong advocates with direct experience of the educational processes in the program. The 69-year-old man, who had not had much contact with teenagers for many years, was tremendously impressed with the students. He summed up by saying, "They were cooperative, friendly, hard working, and easy to get along with. They made me feel a part of the group."

Bringing the School into the Community

The emphasis so far has been on bringing the community into the school. In this section, we look at examples where the school moves into the community. Two cases show that what starts out to be a simple exercise in fund raising becomes a mutually beneficial exchange of service and learning between students and community

members. The third case shows how work-experience can be fitted into a particular subject curriculum. The example is in Biology, but could well be in any subject which matched industrial or commercial opportunities in the community.

Beyond Fund Raising

In 1970, our school began an extracurricular, outdoor adventure program. School funds were not available and expenses promised to be high. The staff saw both the need for fund raising and the need for students to do the work involved. Self-reliance and personal responsibility were important elements in the philosophy of the program. The idea of a Work Day to coincide with spring cleanup time was put into operation.

For two weeks prior to the selected Saturday, ads were placed in the local paper and in store windows. People with work to be done, such as window washing, yard raking, wood piling, or gardening, were asked to call the school and book student workers for the time required on Work Day. Students were assigned to specific jobs in pairs. People paid what they felt the job was worth, usually averaging well over minimum wage. As time passed, there was sufficient demand to add a second Work Day in October. In the '70s, each Work Day would generate $1,000 to $1,500.

In the beginning, Work Days had something of the air of a high school car wash in that people accepted useful work but could have managed without it. The day was an organizational burden for teachers and something of a combined labour and lark for the students. Over the 25 years that Work Days have been operating, significant changes and trends have appeared. Some citizens have had student workers every Work Day for 20 years. They are now seniors and have come to depend on students to do the essential spring and fall work in house and yard. The significance of the students' work has shifted from token help for fund-raising purposes to provision of an essential service in the community.

The reality of that service was revealed by the steady increase in job requests even as student enrollment declined. It became evident that one Saturday in the spring and fall were not enough to meet the demand. Therefore, Work Days are now spread over two, two-week

intervals. There is still local advertising, but orders for help are now assigned differently. Groups of about four students are assigned four to six jobs, depending on the demand. The students are responsible to get in touch with their employers and organize themselves to do the work at suitable times. It works well.

What started out as a simple fund-raising event has become an annual spring and fall institution in the community. Many people, some of them elderly, are dependent on the service and also enjoy having contact with the students. Fund raising is still an important element, but so is the public service component. At the same time, although it is not part of the structure of the Work Days, students learn that they are productive and important contributors to community life. They also learn about the lives of others in their community, especially seniors.

An integrated curriculum project in our school required additional fund raising for major outdoor expeditions. Coincidentally, a relative of one of the teachers told his friend, a nationally known folk singer, of the newly approved program. As a result of this conversation, the singer offered to perform a benefit concert in the school auditorium. The offer was accepted and the students were mobilized to organize advertising, ticket sales, a refreshment booth, the auditorium sound system, and decorations. The results were a fine concert in a small town, by a performer who would not normally have booked there, a fine service to the town by students who attended to the detailed arrangements, an opportunity to learn something about the behind-the-scenes work of a professional musician, and a profit to the program of about $1,500.

This case illustrates not only serendipity and opportunism, but also the value in perceiving fund raising as an important vehicle to make students important contributors to community life.

Subject-Specific Work Experience

Many schools have a variety of work experience or internship programs. The usual placement could last for as little as a month and as much as a semester, and could have relatively weak connections to course work. Here, we describe a pattern of work

experience that takes less time and is an integral part of a particular course of study.

The teacher had been in the school about seven years and had been employed during two summers at a local industry's research lab. This provided a basis of acquaintance and friendship to support the program. Industrial researchers with some expertise in biology were asked to have senior students studying University-entrance, biology work in their labs for two to five days on a specific research project. The criteria of the project were that it would be something a student could do (given instruction), and that it would be of interest to the student and of use to the scientist. All the scientists were excited about the idea and it became a matter of routine administrative procedures to make firm arrangements, getting approval of both school and industry management.

The scientists provided a list of projects they would like to have done in the available time. Students worked in pairs and negotiated their work days directly with the scientist. A day in the industrial lab was worked in the same way by students as by any other worker: they rode the busses to and from the plant, had the usual breaks, and were subject to the usual industrial discipline (ID badges, and the like). Students were required to prepare whatever report the scientist required. There was no additional report required for school although, as students finished the biology research project, they were asked to tell their classmates about both the science and the work experience aspects of their project. Each time the program operates, the teacher meets with the scientists to review it. Because the patience and willingness of the scientists does have limits, and so does the number of suitable projects, this program is operated only once every two to three years.

But are the research projects of real value, or merely indulgent make-work? The projects have varied, but are consistently rated as very good to excellent. In one outstanding example, students replicated the famous Urrey-Miller experiment on the origin of organic molecules necessary for life. The students successfully synthesized and identified 15 different amino acids. Here, again, the sustained enthusiasm of scientists to have students participating in an aspect of community life shows the useful contribution that

students make. There is a mutuality in this kind of curriculum-driven community interaction.

Discussion

Community involvement in education raises two critical questions. First, because there is a potential for loss of professional control of education, what happens when things go wrong, either with community volunteers working with students, or when students are out in the community? Second, how does a teacher learn to involve the community effectively and responsibly?

There is a potential for unhappy incidents to occur when students and community volunteers interact. One example stands out, partly because it is the only one of its kind in our experience and partly because it illustrates the unexpected nature of such problems. A retired volunteer (male) and a young female student-teaching intern, both staff members on a long canoe trip, engaged in a noisy, angry shouting match. It did not augur well for an effective, safe staff on the trip. It turned out that there were long-standing disagreements between members of their families, and these were compounded by gender sensitivities that defied resolution. Fortunately, the staff was large enough that duties could be performed without those two needing to work together, or even to be in very close proximity.

The potential for that kind of disruption, based in history outside the program, must be recognized and accepted. Another kind of potential disruption is that volunteers have no professional obligation to follow through on offers to help. Volunteers are as free to opt out as they are to opt in. In our experience, we have never been let down by volunteers from the community. When one person's participation changes, an alternate is always found. This is a powerful reason for having a large list of collaborators and helpers who are kept abreast of ongoing programs and events.

The most serious implication of community involvement is the consequence of having people learn what is happening in the school. Suppose they don't like what they see? The kind of community involvement we are describing opens the world of school to community members and invites them to participate. For their participation to be informed and significant, for instance, to go beyond tokenism, community members must develop commitment to the curriculum. That means that their views must be heard, respected, and, wherever possible, included in the program.

This is a radical notion. To the extent that schools are opened to the community and community participants are given effective voices, it becomes impossible for teachers and administrators to use textbooks, course outlines, government mandates, and tradition as defences when practices are challenged. If a school seeks allies in the community, it must be prepared to join in a reexamination of its curriculum, teaching methods, and administrative arrangements. The school must be willing to go further and act on the community values expressed in that reexamination. Only then can the benefits we describe be obtained.

This view of community involvement changes the pattern of accountability in the school. It adds an axis of community accountability to those already existing. In our experience, this has been a benefit, rather than a pain, to all concerned. But it has the potential for awkward questions to be asked and difficult requests to be made, and to generate a sudden, unexpected need for defensiveness on the part of teachers.

In our school, some simple operating procedures helped to ensure that community involvement was supportive rather than interfering. First, it is essential to hear and respect suggestions from

community members. It is important for teachers to be very confident in the soundness of the program for which they are seeking help, and to be firm and clear about goals and the kind of help needed. Expectations and roles for community helpers must be spelled out clearly. When adjustments are made to use suggestions and requests from volunteers, the changes must be specific, reasoned, and widely supported. Early meetings with community helpers are critical in setting the stage. The meetings should be brief, well organized, interesting, and only as frequent as required for the specific program. In our experience, meetings for a nonspecific agenda, lengthy meetings, and overly frequent meetings merely invite disagreement.

How and where do teachers learn to work with community members in the sorts of ways described here? In our school, community involvement has grown to be an important and visible aspect of school work, yet learning its dynamics is notably lacking from teacher education. In our case, learning how to involve the community effectively was a matter of long, slow evolution. It takes time to develop knowledge of community resources and to establish trust and good will to activate them. A stable teaching staff, most of whom live in the community, is able to develop accumulative, positive community relations. Time, patience, and sustained interaction taught both teachers and community members a set of skills and procedures for which there is, as yet, no training manual.

The interactions between school and community described here have the effect of restoring the central place of community in the experience of children which existed before the trend to confine education to places called school. There are many benefits which accrue to both the school and the community. Learning, understanding, and increased self-worth are the benefits to the young. Ownership, pride, and commitment grow in community members as they participate in school work. The school, as an organization, gains in resources of personnel, funding, and political support. Wherever teachers are willing to take on a new axis of accountability, community involvement with schools is bound to enhance learning.

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